

Who are we? The impacts of anthropomorphism and the humanization of nonprofits on brand personality

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Abstract In recent years, research on the impact of an organization's brand personality has increased dramatically. Scholars have devoted significant time to devising multiple methods of measuring brand personality, but have often ignored anthropomorphism, an approach favored by anthropologists and sociologists. By attributing human characteristics and traits to non-human entities, such as organizations, personalities are assigned to the brand. Scholars have found that organizations with brand personalities that resembled the consumer were more likely to see customer loyalty and increased sales from the consumer. Nonprofit scholars have identified brand personalities of well-known nonprofit organizations and have linked their brand personalities to fundraising contributions and intentions to donate. This study furthers brand personality studies pertaining to nonprofit organizations by using a intercept survey of 240 adults in the Southeastern United States to determine what the anthropomorphized version of nonprofit organizations would be. Additionally, the perceived version of the nonprofit is compared with the participants' own demographics data to determine the level of social distance the individual has with the individual they imagine when they think about the nonprofits. Results of the study indicate that the greater the social distance between the individual and the nonprofit, the more likely the individual will not become involved with volunteering, donating, or information-seeking behaviors. The implications of these findings are discussed with a focus on what marketing practitioners can do to craft messages and design community outreach efforts to improve their brand personality and how the public perceives their nonprofit organization.

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1 Introduction

Over the last decade, researchers have explored the role brand personality plays in marketing and public relations efforts for a variety of organizations (Freling et al. 2010). Brand personality has been conceptualized as equating human characteristics with an organization (Aaker 1997). By seeing organizations as human beings with unique personalities, an organization's perceived human traits can influence how individuals interact with that organizational brand, such as seeking information out about products (Esch et al. 2006), reinforcing positive attitudes toward products (Aggarwal 2004) and strengthening purchase intent (Aggarwal and McGill 2007). As public relations and marketing take more relational approaches, understanding the personalities publics give to organizations can offer insights into how and why individuals build relationships with certain brands.

Brand personality has been measured and validated through three separate methodologies. First, Aaker (1997) developed scales to measure five dimensions of a brand's personality, including sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These dimensions have been measured repeatedly and have been found to be reliable and valid for a variety of corporate and government organizations. More recently, three dimensions—favorability, originality, and clarity—have been proposed to be important dimensions to understand how a brand's personality is viewed by consumers (Freling et al. 2010). Some of the more intriguing results regarding a brand's personality have emerged from the extension of the psychological concept of anthropomorphism, which deals with assigning human qualities to non-human entities (Brown 2010; Gallup et al. 1997).

Despite volumes of brand personality research, the majority of studies focus on private sector organizations. Voeth and Herbst (2008) proposed that studying a nonprofit's perceived personality could help the organization's leadership team identify key elements of branding to reiterate with their messaging and outreach efforts. Studies have found that understanding a nonprofit's brand personality can help improve fundraising efforts (Hou et al. 2009; Sargeant et al. 2008) and strengthen volunteer recruitment and retention efforts (Faircloth 2005).

The exploration of nonprofit organizations' brand personalities using anthropomorphism has rarely surfaced in published journals, and this study seeks to fill that void. Specifically, this study examines how individuals anthropomorphize nonprofit organizations by exploring the humanized versions of six nonprofit organizations. Additionally, the study uses the concept of social distance to determine whether individuals are more likely to be involved with nonprofits that they perceive to be more like them demographically.

2 Literature review

2.1 Marketing and nonprofit organizations

Significant scholarship has been devoted to understanding how the principles of marketing apply to the nonprofit sector (Wymer et al. 2006; Bennett and Sargeant 2005). Previous research has focused on a variety of marketing concepts ranging from income generation from programs and fundraising to market orientation and audience segmentation. Reputation management and branding have emerged as some of the most theoretically sound and researched marketing concepts as they apply to nonprofit marketing literature. Recently, scholars have encouraged the exploration of relationship marketing as being a fundamental component for understanding how nonprofits connect to their unique constituencies, including volunteers, donors, and clients (Arnett et al. 2003). The relationships that individuals have with nonprofits may be vastly different from the types of relationships they develop with for-profit organizations because of the nature of the organization and stronger interpersonal involvement than with consumer purchases (Fournier and Yao 1997). The relationship that individuals have with nonprofit organizations is deeply rooted in a psychological construction of the brand's personality (Fournier 2009).

2.2 Brand personality

From studies on the relationships between brand personality and a consumer's sense of self to the traits a specific brand exhibits (Pendergrast 1993), research in the marketing field has considered the concept of brand personality for decades. However, it wasn't until Aaker's (1997) attempt to develop a theoretical framework and scale for brand personality that the concept was formally defined. Aaker proposed that brand personality is "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347).

From the above definition of brand personality and research on human personality, Aaker (1997) created a generalizable scale to measure five dimensions of brand personality. Each of these dimensions encompasses specific personality traits. Sincerity is associated with traits like being domestic, honest, and cheerful; excitement with being daring, imaginative, and up-to-date; competence with being reliable, responsible, and efficient; sophistication with being pretentious, charming, and romantic; and ruggedness with being tough, strong, and outdoorsy.

Since Aaker's work in the late 1990s, a number of researchers have applied and expanded her scale to consider how a brand's personality impacts other organizational and branding constructs. In their work to develop a reputation measure that links organizational image and identity, Davies et al. (2001) used Aaker's (1997) scale to assess the constructs in three organizations.

Recently, Swaminathan et al. (2009) focused on the exciting and sincere brand personalities and used attachment theory to frame their study investigating how those personalities influenced branding outcomes, specifically brand attachment, purchase likelihood, and brand choice. By demonstrating a link between individual attachment style and use of brand personality to discriminate among brands, the results indicated

the important role that brand personality plays in building consumer relationships. In addition to looking at branding outcomes, different personalities have also been shown to impact relational dimensions like brand trust and affect. For example, sincere and rugged brands may impact trust more than affect, while exciting and sophisticated brands may influence affect more (Sung and Kim 2010).

As the importance of marketing in the nonprofit sector grows, researchers have begun applying Aaker's brand personality scale in the public sector. A number of studies examine brand personalities of nonprofit organizations from a fundraising perspective. Venable et al. (2003) used a combination of Aaker's (1997) five dimensions of brand personality and traits from qualitative studies to identify four brand dimensions specific to nonprofit organizations: integrity, nurturance, sophistication, and ruggedness. These four dimensions were used to investigate whether nonprofit brand personality would impact a donor's likelihood to contribute (Venable et al. 2005). Correlations were found between the personality dimensions of nonprofit organizations and intent to give among donors. Similarly, it has been found that brand personality has a positive impact on a donor's self-concept and in turn on individual giving intention (Hou et al. 2009).

Other approaches to measuring brand personality have complemented (Grohmann 2009) or refuted (Heere 2010). Aaker's (1997) original measurement scale. Grohmann's (2009) scale measures gender dimensions of personality. In initial application of the scale, there was a positive relationship between a consumer's affect, attitude, and behavior responses and similarity between the brand and consumer gender. In contrast to investigating brand personality from the consumer's perspective, Heere's (2010) approach to personality measurement looks to managerial perspectives on personality and then evaluates the perspectives among the brand's consumers.

The impact of a brand's personality on relational consequences has been assessed using other scales as well. Louis and Lombart (2010) used Ambroise's (2005) measurement scale comprised of nine traits (friendly, creative, charming, ascendant, misleading, original, elegant, conscientious, and introvert) to develop a model of direct and indirect effects of perceived brand personality on brand trust, attachment, and commitment. The resulting model indicated that brand personality affects the type and strength of relationships between consumers and brands.

The empirical research that stemmed from Aaker's work on understanding brand construction generated a significant stream of research; however, it is not the only approach that has been used to examine organizations' brands. Using an approach more situated on an individual's orientation, the psychology-based concept of anthropomorphism has emerged in marketing research as a more specific perspective from which to examine brand personality. This method of understanding brands involves assigning human characteristics to nonhuman entities and having those individual assessments compared to one multiple datapoints to determine how an organization is viewed by the public. By examining brands from the individual's anthropomorphic perspective, researchers are able to better explore the nuances in how organizations are perceived. These differences in brand personality have a significant impact on how a relationship unfolds (Aggarwal and Law 2005)

2.3 Anthropomorphism

Whether talking about gods, animals, or inanimate objects, anthropomorphism has remained a subject of interest for many academic disciplines over the years. Rooted in psychology, anthropomorphism is loosely defined by Guthrie (1997) as the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman objects and events. Over the years, this phenomenon has evolved from an extension of animism to a concept that incorporates personality, interaction, and behavior. Waytz et al. (2010) offer that anthropomorphism is going farther than just giving off behavioral characteristics to nonhuman objects; it is now inferring them with a human form or a human mind that renders them capable of much greater influence. This shift from behavior to mental cognition has created an interest in the marketing and advertising sector about the effects of anthropomorphism.

Many academic disciplines have offered insights into why anthropomorphism occurs and how individuals use it in varying contexts. Marketing, advertising, and brand management literature has largely focused on how this phenomenon relates to the consumer. Moynihan (1997) claims that it is natural to anthropomorphize brands as humans can only create reality of what they can observe and conceptualize.

Guthrie (1997) argues that anthropomorphism occurs for three reasons: (1) to make that which is nonhuman seem more familiar, (2) to gain reassurance about using the brand, and (3) to decrease uncertainty in ambiguous situations. A recent study found support for this argument that indicated that respondents humanized brands in order to reduce uncertainty and risk involved in using the brand, giving the consumer a feeling of comfort (Freling and Forbes 2005). Labroo et al. (2008) found that even making a product display with an anthropomorphic appearance could increase consumers' affinity for that product.

Further research by Epley et al. (2007) claims that anthropomorphism is largely determined by the accessibility of human knowledge, the presence of situational cues, and by the individual's motivation during evaluation. This study implies a shift from simply observing the anthropomorphic qualities of a nonhuman entity to examining the relationship and interaction that occurs between the human and nonhuman. The presence of such a relationship could have lasting implications on how and why individuals identify with certain brands.

Attributing mental capacities to nonhuman entities requires that individuals treat the entity as a moral agent worthy of care and concern, hold it responsible for its actions, and view the agent as a source of nominal social influence on the public (Gray et al. 2007). Similarly, Fouriner (1998) argues that a brand must possess human characteristics such as emotion and thought in order to become a legitimate relationship partner for the consumer. This mode of thought provides serious implications when related to brand personality and the relationship between consumers and the anthropomorphism of brands.

Some scholars view anthropomorphism as a unique entity of brand personality. The relationship between self-concept and brand image had an effect on how the consumer identified with the anthropomorphic qualities of the brand (Puzakova et al. 2009). Consumers who were chronically lonely or exhibited a high need to belong were more likely to have a higher positive association with anthropomorphic brands. This interplay between consumer needs and brand relationship represents a new

avenue in anthropomorphic brand research. Given the arguments posed by scholars that brands need human characteristics in order for relationship marketing and public relations efforts to be successful, the first research question was posed to gauge which traits are most often associated with nonprofit organizations:

RQ1: What human qualities do individuals assign to six national nonprofit organization brands?

The human qualities of brands, or brand personality, have implications for both individuals and organizations. For this reason, it's crucial to not only understand what human qualities are associated with brands, but also how and why those qualities are assigned. Social distance offers one perspective from which to look at the relationships between an individual's personality traits and the personality traits he/she assigns to a brand.

2.4 Social distance

Developed by sociologist Emory Bogardus (1925), social distance is the perceived distance between different social groupings. Social distance has been defined in terms of the measure of understanding and affiliation that individuals experience regarding one another. The concept of social distance has been measured in a variety of manners, ranging from the simple dichotomy of "people like me" and "people different from me" (Meirick 2004) to Karakayali's (2009) scale that uses four psychological and sociological dimensions (affective, normative, interactive, and cultural). The most common method of determining social distance, however, involves comparing gender, race, and age of individuals with others (Liviatan et al. 2008; Tsui and O'Reilly 1989).

Largely studied as a measure of psychological distance, researchers have examined social distance in relation to prejudice (Weaver 2008), stigmatization of mental illness (Baumann 2007), establishing connections with neighborhood residents (Hipp and Perrin 2009) and cultural affiliation (Buchan et al. 2006). Although little research has applied social distance to the study of brand personality, it has been used to understand consumer responses to peer recommendations (Zhao and Xie 2011) and how consumers assess assistance offered by sales associates (Kim et al. 2008). Findings from a variety of contexts and disciplines continue to find that individuals express a desire to reduce the social distance between themselves and others they are associated with. Given previous results that intimate that individuals prefer to be more closely connected to those that are similar to themselves, this study posed a second research question to determine whether social distance influenced an individual's perceptions of anthropomorphized nonprofits:

RQ2: Are participants more likely to see themselves in their humanized version of the six nonprofit organizations?

Finally, this study seeks to provide some context for why anthropomorphism and social distance is important for organizations' leadership to consider when planning their branding and marketing initiatives as well as implementing their programs and community outreach. Given previous sales-oriented studies that found that individuals are drawn to recommendations from people who are like themselves and are more

likely to ask questions of sales associates whom they have a connection with, the study's final research question explores the role of social distance and behavioral intent within the nonprofit organization context:

RQ3: Do people express a desire to become involved with nonprofit organizations that they perceive to have similar demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race, and age) as themselves?

3 Method

The research team used intercept survey methodology with adults in a metropolitan Southeastern city in the United States to measure the human traits assigned to nonprofit organizations. Intercept surveys involve approach potential participants in heavily trafficked areas and requesting their participation in the project. Hornik and Ellis (1988) discuss strategies to increase response rates and reduce sample bias when using intercept surveys. A total of 1,003 individuals were asked to participate in the study, and 240 completed useable surveys, which resulted in a survey response rate of 23.9 %.

To assess the human qualities individuals assign to nonprofit organizations, participants were asked to envision a specific nonprofit organization if that organization were a living person. Participants then answered a series of 11 questions about the human version of the organization. These questions included both closed-ended questions that represented the standard demographic profile (e.g., gender, age, race, marital status, education level) and open-ended questions to assess personality and individual human traits (e.g., favorite beverage, favorite music style, type of pet, preferred clothing outfit, number of children). The questions were derived from existing literature on anthropomorphism; although they did not come from one study in particular, they were designed based on previous questions and recommendations made in recent scholarship (Ouellet et al. 2008; Epley et al. 2008, 2007). These questions were repeated for six nationally-recognized nonprofit organizations: the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, Nature Conservancy, Habitat for Humanity, American Cancer Society and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). These organizations were chosen because they are large, well-known nonprofit organizations that have diverse missions and target publics.

Prior to the analysis of the data, the research team coded responses for the open-ended questions for comparison purposes. Additionally, a measure of social distance was calculated for each participant based on three provided demographic measures (gender, race, and age). The research team restricted this initial exploration to these three demographic measures because they were the three variables that have been found to be most important in determining social distance in previous studies (Liviatan et al. 2008). The social distance measure was created by awarding one point if the participant's demographics matched the organization's anthropomorphized demographics across each of the three dimensions while two points were awarded if the participant's demographics differed from the organization. Thus, the social distance measure could range from a low score of three, which indicates that the individual is very similar to the human version of the nonprofit organization, to a high score of six, which indicated that the individual is completely different from the

human version of the nonprofit organization. These social distance measures were used to compare the mean scores of three behavioral intentions (e.g., donating to the nonprofit, volunteering for the nonprofit, and seeking information from the nonprofit). In addition to the above measures, survey participants also answered a set of seven demographic questions, including items about gender, race, age, and marital status.

4 Results

Participants submitted 240 usable questionnaires. The sample was 60 % female ($n=144$) with an average age of 31.5 years ($SD=12.11$). The sample was 77.5 % Caucasian ($n=186$), 10.4 % African-American ($n=25$), 2.1 % Asian ($n=5$), 3.8 % Hispanic/Latino ($n=9$), 5.8 % Middle Eastern ($n=14$), and 0.4 % Native American ($n=1$). Close majorities of the sample have received an undergraduate degree (41.7 %, $n=100$) and haven't been married (49.2 %, $n=118$).

4.1 Humanizing nonprofits

The first research question sought to determine what human qualities individuals assign to nonprofit organizations. Descriptive statistics were conducted on the responses for each of the six organizations to get frequencies and percentages in order to determine the dominant human qualities. Table 1 presents the anthropomorphized version of the six nonprofits based on the majority of responses from the survey participants.

Table 1 Anthropomorphized version of nonprofit organizations

Human trait	American Red Cross	Salvation Army	Nature Conservancy	Habitat for Humanity	American Cancer Society	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female
Race	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Age	36–55 years	36–55 years	22–35 years	22–35 years	56–70 years	22–35 years
Marital status	Married	Married	Single	Married	Widowed	Single
Education level	Bachelor's degree	Highschool diploma	Master's degree	Highschool diploma	Doctoral degree	Bachelor's degree
Pet ownership	Bird	Dog	Dog	Dog	Cat	Dog
Number of children	None	2	None	2	2	None
Favorite music style	Adult Contemporary	Oldies	Alternative	Country	Classical	Alternative
Preferred beverage	Water	Soda	Water	Beer	Coffee/hot tea	Water
Preferred clothing style	Blouse/button-up shirts and slacks	Pullover and jeans	Pullover and jeans	T-shirt and jeans	Business suit	T-shirt and shorts

American Red Cross Based on the results of the survey, the American Red Cross was perceived to be a married (61.7 %, $n=148$), Caucasian (87.5 %, $n=210$) female (74.6 %, $n=179$) between the ages of 36 and 55 (46.3 %, $n=111$). The most frequent level of education reported was an undergraduate degree (45.4 %, $n=109$). A majority of participants perceived the human version of the organization to have a bird (54.6 %, $n=131$) as a household pet. Number of children, music, and outfit did not indicate majority agreement among participants. Participants perceived that the organization had either none (27.9 %, $n=67$) or two children (26.3 %, $n=63$) and listened to adult contemporary (27.1 %, $n=65$) or oldies (23.3 %, $n=56$) music. Similarly, results were divided on whether the human version of the organization wore a blouse or button-up shirt with slacks (40.0 %, $n=96$) or a pullover and jeans (32.9 %, $n=79$). Of the 222 coded beverage responses, 31.5 % ($n=70$) were water and 23.4 % ($n=52$) were a variety of juices.

Salvation Army The Salvation Army was found to be a married (48.3 %, $n=116$), Caucasian (51.7 %, $n=124$) male (79.5 %, $n=191$) between the ages of 36 and 55 (42.9 %, $n=103$). Participants perceived that the human version of the Salvation Army listened primarily to oldies music (26.7 %, $n=64$), wore a pullover and jeans (45.0 %, $n=108$) and owned a dog (49.6 %, $n=119$). Level of education and number of children stood out as most divided categories. The Salvation Army was perceived to have a high school diploma (40.0 %, $n=96$), some college but no degree (23.8 %, $n=57$), or an undergraduate degree (20.4 %, $n=49$). Participants were also split between none (20.8 %, $n=50$), two (21.3 %, $n=51$), or three children (17.5 %, $n=42$). Of the 210 coded beverage responses, 33.8 % ($n=71$) were soda beverages and 33.7 % ($n=71$) were beverages containing alcohol.

Nature Conservancy Participants perceived the human version of the Nature Conservancy as a single (46.7 %, $n=112$), Caucasian (67.5 %, $n=162$) male (56.3 %, $n=135$) between the ages of 22 and 35 (52.5 %, $n=126$) with no children (46.7 %, $n=112$). The Nature Conservancy was most likely to wear jeans and a pullover shirt (43.3 %, $n=104$). Results indicated that there was no majority agreement on education level, pet, and musical preference. Education level was split between a doctorate degree (35.4 %, $n=85$) or an undergraduate degree (28.3 %, $n=68$) and pet was divided among dog (24.6 %, $n=59$), bird (23.8 %, $n=57$), or cat (22.1 %, $n=53$). Musical preference was almost evenly split among alternative (22.9 %, $n=55$), rock-and-roll (20.8 %, $n=50$), and country (16.7 %, $n=40$). Of the 220 coded beverage responses, 51.4 % ($n=113$) were water and 18.2 % ($n=40$) were alcoholic beverages.

Habitat for Humanity Participants perceived the human version of Habitat for Humanity as a married (55.8 %, $n=134$), Caucasian (68.8 %, $n=165$) male (69.2 %, $n=166$) between the ages of 22 and 35 (69.2 %, $n=166$) with a high school diploma (43.8 %, $N=105$). The human version of the organization was found to most likely to wear a T-shirt and jeans (41.7 %, $n=100$) and own a dog (60 %, $n=144$). There was no consensus on musical preference or number of children. Participants thought Habitat for Humanity would listen to country (20 %, $n=48$), Top 40 (19.6 %, $n=47$), or rock-and-roll (17.9 %, $n=43$). Responses were divided between either two (25.4 %, $n=61$) children or none (23.8 %, $n=57$). Of the 207 coded beverage

responses, 30.9 % ($n=64$) were alcoholic beverages and 21.7 % ($n=45$) were soda beverages.

American Cancer Society Participants perceived the human version of the American Cancer Society as a widowed (72.5 %, $n=174$), Caucasian (75.8 %, $n=182$) female (71.7 %, $n=172$) between the ages of 56 and 70 (57.1 %, $n=137$). Results indicated the human version of the American Cancer Society had a doctoral degree (30.8 %, $n=74$), with high numbers of participants perceiving that the organization had a graduate (28.8 %, $n=69$) or undergraduate degree (20.4 %, $n=49$). The human version of the organization was perceived to have two children (40.0 %, $n=96$) and listen to classical music (32.5 %, $n=78$) or oldies (19.2 %, $n=46$). Responses about household pet and typical outfit were closely split between cat (30.4 %, $n=73$) and dog (28.3 %, $n=68$) and a business suit (40.8 %, $n=98$) and blouse/button-up shirt and slacks (33.8 %, $n=81$), respectively. Of the 181 coded beverage responses, 31.5 % ($n=57$) were coffee or hot tea beverages and 27.6 % ($n=50$) were wine.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) The human version of PETA was perceived to be a single (65.4 %, $n=157$), Caucasian (78.0 %, $n=195$) female (80.0 %, $n=192$) between the ages of 22 and 35 (64.6 %, $n=155$). Participants perceived the human version of the organization as having an undergraduate degree (38.3 %, $n=92$) or at least some college, but no degree (22.5 %, $n=54$). With no children (64.6 %, $n=155$), results indicated that the human version of the organization would have either a dog (32.1 %, $n=77$) or cat (21.3 %, $n=51$) as a pet. Participants perceived that PETA would listen to alternative music (32.5 %, $n=78$) or Top 40 (22.5 %, $n=54$) and wear shorts and a T-shirt (42.1 %, $n=101$). Of the 206 coded beverage responses, 44.7 % ($n=92$) were water, 19.9 % ($n=41$) were coffee or tea beverages, and 16.5 % ($n=34$) were alcoholic beverages.

4.2 Evidence of social distance

The second research question sought to determine the differences and similarities between an individual's human qualities and the human qualities that are assigned to nonprofit organizations. To determine whether social distance was evident in the findings, chi-square tests were conducted for gender, race, and age variables assigned for each of the six organizations and the participants. These variables were chosen because they are the three main demographic variables used to establish social distance between members of society (Liviatan et al. 2008; Tsui and O'Reilly 1989). Chi-square tests allowed researchers to determine whether participants were envisioning the organizations in similar proportions to the range of options available to them (e.g., male or female; single, married, divorced, or widowed) or whether they were imagining the organizations to be largely reflective of one of the choices.

Gender To examine different perceptions of the nonprofits in terms of their imagined gender, chi-square tests were run to determine if male and female survey participants envisioned them in similar proportions. Statistically significant differences emerged for all six organizations: American Red Cross ($\chi^2=12.85$, $df=2$, $p=.002$), Salvation

Army ($\chi^2=25.18$, $df=2$, $p<.000$), Nature Conservancy ($\chi^2=61.22$, $df=2$, $p<.000$), Habitat for Humanity ($\chi^2=67.87$, $df=2$, $p<.000$), American Cancer Society ($\chi^2=52.54$, $df=2$, $p<.000$), and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) ($\chi^2=74.04$, $df=2$, $p<.000$). Looking at these differences further, women (82.6 %, $n=119$) were more likely than men (63.3 %, $n=57$) to perceive the human version of the American Red Cross as female. Although both genders viewed the Salvation Army as a male, men (83.3 %, $n=75$) were more likely to think that the organization was a male than women did (78.4 %, $n=113$). Likewise, men (61.1 %, $n=55$) felt that the Nature Conservancy was more likely to be represented by a male than women (55.6 %, $n=80$) did even though the majority of both groups expressed that the organization would be a male. Women (72.9 %, $n=105$) were more likely to feel that Habitat for Humanity was envisioned as a male than male survey participants (68.9 %, $n=62$) did. Similarly, women (79.9 %, $n=115$) were much more likely to consider the American Cancer Society as a female than males (66.7 %, $n=60$) did. Finally, males (87.8 %, $n=79$) viewed PETA as a female in much greater proportion than females did (80.6 %, $n=116$).

Race To compare for race, participants were classified as Caucasian and non-Caucasian given the lower than expected survey completion rates for minorities. In comparing the race responses for organizations between Caucasian and non-Caucasian participants, statistically significant results were found for the American Red Cross ($\chi^2=24.57$, $df=2$, $p<.001$), Salvation Army ($\chi^2=8.56$, $df=2$, $p=.003$), American Cancer Society ($\chi^2=3.93$, $df=2$, $p=.047$), and the Nature Conservancy ($\chi^2=4.10$, $df=2$, $p=.042$). For the American Red Cross, non-Caucasians (25 %, $n=12$) were more likely to view the organization as a non-Caucasian than Caucasian survey participants (9.7 %, $n=18$) did. Once again, non-Caucasians (66.7 %, $n=32$) had a significantly higher percentage of respondents expressing that the Salvation Army would be represented by a minority rather than a Caucasian than Caucasian participants (43.0 %, $n=80$) did. The American Cancer Society was considered to be a Caucasian by the vast majority of participants, but Caucasians (80.1 %, $n=149$) were more likely to view the organization as a Caucasian than non-Caucasians (66.7 %, $n=32$). Similar results emerged for the Nature Conservancy, which was viewed as a Caucasian more by Caucasians (71.5 %, $n=133$) than non-Caucasians (56.3 %, $n=27$). Overall, the survey participants viewed both Habitat for Humanity ($\chi^2=1.46$, $df=2$, $p=.226$) and PETA ($\chi^2=0.18$, $df=2$, $p=.663$) as Caucasians and did so in similar proportion resulting in the lack of statistical significance.

Age When comparing the age categories (0–21 years, 22–35 years, 36–55 years, 56–70 years, and 71 years+), the only statistically significant finding that emerged was for the Salvation Army ($\chi^2=63.37$, $df=20$, $p=.000$). For the Salvation Army, all age groups felt that the organization would be represented by an individual in the 36–55 age range; however, respondents in that age bracket ($n=17$, 32.1 %) were more likely to think that the organization might be in an older category. No statistically significant differences emerged for the American Red Cross ($\chi^2=18.91$, $df=20$, $p=.53$), Nature Conservancy ($\chi^2=14.97$, $df=20$, $p=.778$), Habitat for Humanity ($\chi^2=20.95$, $df=20$, $p=.40$), American Cancer Society ($\chi^2=20.79$, $df=20$, $p=.41$), or PETA ($\chi^2=24.43$, $df=20$, $p=.224$). These non-statistically significant findings indicate that the age

groups envisioned the humanized representative of the organization in similar proportions to each other in terms of age.

4.3 The impact of social distance on behavior

The third research question sought to determine whether the social distance that surfaced in the study had an impact on the behavioral intentions of the participants. Previous research indicates that people generally-speaking are drawn to individuals that are most like themselves. As such, this study asked whether envisioning a nonprofit organization as a human with similar traits and demographics caused participants to be more drawn to the organization for fundraising, volunteering, and information-seeking behaviors regardless of the mission.

To compare the mean scores of individuals' behavioral intent, the researchers first had to calculate a social distance measure by awarding one point for every time the participant's gender, race, or age matched their answer for the nonprofit organization's imagined demographics while two points were awarded for those that did not match. These totals were divided by three to get an overall social distance measure, and the range for these would have been 1 for a match on all three demographic variables and a 2 for a disagreement on on three variables. This procedure was conducted for all six organizations before dividing the social distance measures into two groups: individuals with low social distance (scores of 1.00 and 1.33), which indicate the respondents are very similar to the anthropomorphized nonprofit; and individuals with high social distance scores (scores of 1.66 and 2.00), which indicate the respondents are substantially different than the imagined humanized nonprofit. Once the groups were divided, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean scores for the conducting a one-way ANOVA to compare the groups differences. Table 2 shows that there is mixed support for this proposition. When looking at the overall trends that emerged from the behavioral intent measures, it appears that individuals in the low social distance groupings generally were more likely to volunteer and donate with the organizations. For some organizations, they also were more likely to seek out information.

For the American Red Cross, individuals who were similar in demographics to the humanized version of the organization that they imagined were more likely to volunteer ($F(1, 239)=7.01, p=.009$) and donate ($F(1, 239)=6.23, p=.013$); they were also more likely to seek information from the organization ($F(1, 239)=2.98, p=.08$) though it should be noted this finding only had statistically significant leanings. For the Salvation Army, there were no statistical differences for information-seeking behavior ($F(1, 239)=.278, p=.59$), but low social distance individuals were more likely to volunteer ($F(1, 239)=8.94, p=.003$) and donate ($F(1, 239)=6.15, p=.014$) to the organization. The Nature Conservancy findings were the only ones that were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level for all three behaviors: volunteering ($F(1, 239)=34.07, p<.001$), donating ($F(1, 239)=25.31, p<.001$), and information seeking ($F(1, 239)=22.03, p<.001$); paralleling previous findings, individuals with lower social distance scores were more likely to be involved with the organization.

The only statistically significant finding that emerged for Habitat for Humanity focused on donating ($F(1, 239)=4.42, p=.037$) though both volunteering ($F(1, 239)=3.86, p=.051$) and information seeking ($F(1, 239)=3.76, p=.054$) neared statistically

Table 2 Mean scores of the behavioral intention measures for low and high social distance groups for all six nonprofit organizations

	I am likely to volunteer at the organization	I am likely to donate to the organization	I am likely to seek information from the organization
American Red Cross			
Low social distance group ($n=25$)	5.28 (1.49)	5.68 (1.31)	4.88 (1.69)
High social distance group ($n=215$)	4.26 (1.86)	4.75 (1.79)	4.18 (1.94)
Salvation Army			
Low social distance group ($n=26$)	4.75 (1.80)	5.33 (1.52)	3.52 (1.75)
High social distance group ($n=214$)	3.54 (1.89)	4.34 (1.90)	3.76 (2.01)
Nature Conservancy			
Low social distance group ($n=28$)	5.24 (1.59)	5.16 (1.55)	4.96 (1.77)
High social distance group ($n=212$)	3.06 (1.78)	3.26 (1.81)	3.09 (1.90)
Habitat for Humanity			
Low social distance group ($n=22$)	5.09 (1.85)	4.95 (1.86)	4.60 (2.30)
High social distance group ($n=218$)	4.28 (1.84)	4.11 (1.73)	3.75 (1.83)
American Cancer Society			
Low social distance group ($n=21$)	5.00 (1.80)	5.91 (1.27)	4.96 (1.60)
High social distance group ($n=219$)	4.11 (1.76)	4.88 (1.79)	4.21 (2.06)
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals			
Low social distance group ($n=27$)	3.80 (2.29)	3.72 (2.28)	3.64 (2.27)
High social distance group ($n=213$)	2.62 (1.96)	2.71 (1.94)	2.76 (1.99)

significant levels. Information-seeking behaviors ($F(1, 239)=2.98, p=.085$) did not differ significantly for low and high social distance groups, but volunteering ($F(1, 239)=5.66, p=.018$) and donating ($F(1, 239)=6.94, p=.009$) did. Once again, the closer demographically the individual was to the anthropomorphized version of the organization, the more likely they were to be involved with the organization. Finally, all three behaviors were statistically significant for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals; however, it should be noted that none of the three behaviors—volunteering ($F(1, 239)=7.84, p=.006$), donating ($F(1, 239)=5.87, p=.016$), and information seeking ($F(1, 239)=4.18, p=.042$)—had mean scores that were above the neutral point of the 7-point scale.

5 Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the six nonprofit organizations examined have distinct human versions perceived by participants. From basic demographics to personality traits and imagined consumer preferences, the survey participants saw unique individuals when imagining the anthropomorphized version of these nonprofit organizations. This study went beyond just identifying the human characteristics of each organization by exploring the dimension of social distance in relation to behavioral intentions for the organizations. When the survey participants saw

similarities between themselves and their own perceptions of what the organizations' human identity would be, they were much more likely to be involved with that nonprofit in terms of volunteering and donating. For two of the six organizations, the greater involvement also impacted information-seeking behaviors. This initial investigation into the anthropomorphized human personas of nonprofit organizations has implications for marketing and public relations professionals and also raises several questions for future research.

The first research question sought to reveal the human versions of six nonprofit organizations as perceived by participants. These results confirm previous research on brand personality and anthropomorphism that found individuals assign human qualities to brands (i.e., Freling and Forbes 2005; Swaminathan et al. 2009), but also go beyond standard personality traits to build actual human personas for an organization. According to Fournier (1998), human characteristics are necessary for a brand to build relationships with consumers. The personas created for these nonprofit organizations are individuals with a variety of human characteristics, including interests, relationships, and education. Some results varied greatly within and among organizations, but others showed strong agreement.

Age, race, and gender, and marital status resulted in a high level of agreement among participants for all organizations. For example, over 50 % of all participants perceived the human version of Habitat for Humanity as a married, Caucasian male between the ages of 22 and 35. The similarity of these organizational personality aspects may have to do with the homogeneity of the sample. The majority of the sample was Caucasian females, and all six organizations were perceived as Caucasian with only two males.

Other personality aspects, such as education, pet ownership, music and beverage preferences resulted in less agreement among participants; however, majorities still emerged for several of these categories when looking at individual organizations. For nonprofit leaders and those working in marketing, community outreach, and strategic communication, it is vital to understand how the public perceives your organization. Determining whether your organization is seen as masculine versus feminine or youthful versus aging can have significant impact on how successful campaigns and branding efforts are. Based on the second and third research questions of the study, the anthropomorphized version of an organization can also have significant influence on what types of people are likely to be involved with an organization.

The latter parts of this research study sought to explore the relationship between participant race and gender and the perceived race and gender of the human form of the six nonprofit organizations. Grohmann (2009) found that a positive relationship exists between a consumer's affect, attitude and behavior responses when gender was similar for both the consumer and brand. The current findings reinforce these findings as individuals with minimal differences in terms of perceived social distance expressed a greater desire to volunteer, donate, and seek information from the six measured nonprofit organizations. Knowing that an individual is more likely to be involved with an organization that it considers similar to his or herself, marketing practitioners can begin to craft branding efforts and messages that will likely resonate with those groups. Through careful construction of messages, visual design, and strategic engagement with targeted demographic groups, nonprofits can begin to cultivate relationships with these individuals and influence how the organization perceives them anthropomorphically (Rossolatos 2012).

5.1 Practical implications for marketing professionals

As relationship building and management become central for organizational communication efforts, it's necessary to be aware of how publics perceive their human versions. Previous research stressed the need for brands to exhibit human characteristics in order to build relationships with consumers (Fournier 1998). By seeking out the perceptions publics have for an organization's human version, marketing and public relations professionals may discover surprising personas that do not match with their current marketing initiatives. This should become another aspect of marketing research that's undertaken routinely in order to stay informed of key publics and their perceptions and needs.

Identification between a public and a nonprofit organization can play an important role for relationships and organizational outcomes. If an organization professional were to find out its human self is perceived as drastically different from its key publics, these differences could increase social distance and decrease identification. Marketers and public relations practitioners can use these human versions to their advantage by proactively adapting communication efforts to increase identification between the organization and key publics.

It is important to note that this initial exploration of the concept of anthropomorphism and social distance is only that, a first step into understanding the impact of these perceptions of nonprofit organizations. This study does not seek to claim that individuals who perceive a nonprofit as being vastly different from them would not become involved with that organization. The nonprofit sector has long been an advocate for social justice and acceptance of diverse populations, and individuals in need of specific information or those who are deeply committed to a cause are likely to become involved with an organization regardless of its anthropomorphized form. However, this study demonstrates that individuals have a preference for involvement with nonprofits that they perceive to be similar to themselves

6 Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that individuals do assign distinct human characteristics to nonprofit organizations. Furthermore, dimensions of race and gender were found to be similar between the organization's human version and the public. These findings support previous research on brand personality, but extended it to look more deeply at the human version an organization portrays. These findings have implications for marketing professionals who want to develop relationships with key publics in order to ensure positive organizational outcomes.

6.1 Limitations and future research

This study's biggest flaw is the homogeneity within the participant sample. Over three-fourths of the total sample was Caucasian, and more than half was female. Despite being conducted in a city with a reasonably diverse population, minorities declined to participate in the intercept survey by a 8-to-1 ratio based on analysis of the researcher's field notes during the data collection phase. This lack of diversity in the

sample reduces the generalizability of the study's results. The research team consisted of Caucasian males and females, and declinations to participate by minorities may have been anecdotal evidence of social distance that the study was hoping to measure. However, because of the limited participation by minorities, it is difficult to generalize the results of the study beyond its participants.

The study also raised a number of questions that warrant further investigation. This study was an initial investigation that looked at the human versions of nonprofit organizations that also looked at behavioral intentions, but not actual participation. Future research into this area may consider exploring how individuals who are involved with a nonprofit may view that nonprofit. It would be interesting to explore whether people who are already donors or volunteers at a nonprofit imagine the human version of the organization in a similar manner or whether they perceive themselves as being similar to the individual. Taking a more qualitative approach with in-depth questions would also allow scholars and practitioners to understand why individuals have certain perceptions of organizations and delve into the ramifications of those perceptions.

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